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SUBJECT: MARCH 4-6 CHIRAC VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA: FOCUS ON
SYRIA/LEBANON, REPLACING LAHOUD

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Syria/Lebanon were the primary topics of President Chirac's March 4 and 5 meetings with Saudi King Abdullah, with Iran, Hamas/PA, and Iraq discussed to a lesser degree. Elysee contacts described the Saudi monarch as bitter over rejection of the Saudi initiative on Syria-Lebanon reconciliation, and reluctantly agreeing to a joint Saudi-Egyptian approach to seek Syrian support for replacement of Lebanese President Lahoud. Elysee contacts noted King Abdullah's opposition to an Aoun presidency, his support for an international tribunal, and his agreement to participate in a future Core Group conference on Lebanon. Elysee contacts described the Saudis as worried by Iran's rising regional influence and popularity among the Muslim masses, but at the same time, wanting the West to resolve the Iran nuclear problem for them without destabilizing the region. Elysee contacts also speculated that Saudi Arabia would give money to a Hamas-led PA to counteract Iranian influence, though King Abdullah did not say so specifically. Elysee contacts described King Abdullah as extremely negative on Iraq and preoccupied with the security of the Saudi-Iraqi border and prospects for Saudi jihadists in Iraq returning home to wreak havoc. Elysee contacts described Chirac as seeking to encourage King Abdullah's reform efforts, most notably in his speech to the Saudi consultative council; at the same time, Elysee contacts described the King as speaking in aphorisms and appearing somewhat out of touch with the outside world. In a separate readout, MFA contacts described Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal's meeting with French FM Douste-Blazy as focused on Iran and Lebanon, with the Saudi FM reiterating intent to continue direct dialogue with Iran and describing Israel's nuclear program as detrimental to international non-proliferation efforts. On the trade front, Elysee and MFA contacts downplayed the lack of contracts concluded during the Chirac visit, though the absence of such commercial breakthroughs led many French media outlets to conclude that the visit brought minimal results. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) President Chirac completed his fourth official visit to Saudi Arabia March 4-6, accompanied by four ministers (Foreign Affairs, Defense, Economy, Foreign Trade) and some 15 top business executives, including CEO's of Total, SOFRESA, SODEHXO, Dassault, Alstom, Accor, BNP Paribas, Thales Vinci, and Veolia. Chirac met with Saudi King Abdullah March 4 and 5, in discussions that were largely one-on-one. He also became the first foreign leader to address the Saudi Consultative Council March 5, during which he stressed the GoF's desire for a strategic partnership with Riyadh, called for Syria to "change its behavior" in Lebanon, lauded Saudi King Abdullah's political and economic reforms, and called for Saudi Arabia and France to unite to thwart a "clash of ignorance disguised as a clash of civilizations."

The ministers accompanying Chirac also had bilateral meetings with their Saudi counterparts, with the exception of Defense Minister Alliot-Marie, whose counterpart, Prince Sultan Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, was vacationing in Morocco at the time of the visit -- a move which some French press outlets interpreted as a rebuff of French efforts to revive a long-stalled Rafale plane sale to Saudi Arabia (see para 14 for more on economic/commercial issues.) Poloff received a readout on the Chirac-King Abdullah discussions from Presidential Technical Advisor on the Middle East/Americas Dominique Boche, and a separate briefing on discussions between FM Douste-Blazy and FM Saud al-Faisal from MFA DAS-equivalent for Iraq/Iran/Arabian Gulf Antoine Sivan.

CHIRAC SEEKS KING'S SUPPORT FOR REPLACING LAHOUD

13. (C) Elysee advisor Boche described the Chirac-Abdullah discussions as focused primarily on Syria/Lebanon, with Chirac persuading a reluctant King Abdullah to take on a more active Saudi role in efforts to replace President Lahoud. Boche said King Abdullah, from the outset, expressed deep bitterness over the failed Saudi initiative on Syrian-Lebanese reconciliation. King Abdullah told Chirac that Saudi Arabia had sought to "calm" the Lebanese situation in the wake of the wave of assassinations and put ideas on paper -- all of which were negotiable. After the brusque Lebanese rejection of the Saudi initiative, the King concluded, Saudi Arabia was not inclined to pursue further initiatives unless the Lebanese were in general agreement about the outlines first.

14. (C) Chirac, in response, told the King that the Saudi initiative had been misunderstood, with then-Syrian FM Shara distorting it to appear as his own plan. Chirac advised the

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King that Lebanon "needed Saudi Arabia's wisdom" and that Saudi Arabia had to mobilize anew on Lebanon's behalf. Chirac described the internal situation in Lebanon, focusing on President Lahoud's absolute blockage of all progress; the French president concluded that it was in the interest of all Lebanon's neighbors, Syria included, for Lahoud to be replaced. He proposed that Saudi Arabia and Egypt should seek to discuss with the Syrian leadership "ways to improve" Syria's situation, while preserving Lebanese sovereignty, namely by replacing Lahoud. Boche described King Abdullah as initially reticent on a Lahoud departure, fearing instability and resurgence of militia activity in Lebanon, as well as worried that Lahoud's exit would open the door to a Michel Aoun presidency. The King concluded that 18 months of a weakened Lahoud was better than six years of an Aoun presidency. Chirac, in turn, sought to convince the King that the risk of sectarian confrontations in Lebanon was in the past, pointing to the National Dialogue as a positive example. Chirac also advised King Abdullah that there was no chance of an Aoun presidency, as the Christian community was not united behind him, with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir continuing to oppose him as well.

15. (C) Over the course of Chirac's three days in Saudi Arabia, Boche concluded, the Saudi monarch modified his attitude and, in the end, agreed to a joint Saudi-Egyptian approach to Bashar al-Asad on the Lahoud issue during the March 28-29 Arab League summit. Boche commented that the Saudis and Egyptians had to move fast and should approach the SARG before the summit, conceding that such an approach did not have great chances for success. He explained that the upcoming report by UNIIIC Chief Brammertz was likely to contain "nothing new," which in turn would embolden the SARG and make it even less likely to make concessions. Bashar al-Asad's recent speech touting Lahoud as Lebanon's best president was further evidence, in Boche's view, that the SARG was not ready to cut loose Lahoud. Asked what incentives Syria might seek in exchange for supporting Lahoud's removal and how this would not counteract

U.S.-French efforts to isolate Damascus, Boche observed that this remained an unknown and the essential question. Perhaps, he speculated, the very act of seeking Bashar's support for Lahoud's removal would constitute a tacit message that the international community was not seeking to remove the Syrian president, which in itself was an incentive.

YES TO TRIBUNAL, CONFERENCE, SYRIAN REGIME STABILITY

¶6. (C) On other Syria/Lebanon-related points, Boche described King Abdullah as supportive of an international tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination. The King also confirmed his willingness to participate in an international economic conference on Lebanon. On Syria, the King remained fearful of a possible overthrow of the regime, viewing potential successors, including a pro-Iranian regime or radical Sunni Islamist government, as worse than the current government. Boche concluded that King Abdullah appeared to prefer a weak, but stable SARG under international pressure, similar to the situation of Saddam Hussein in the post-Gulf War period. Boche added that throughout Chirac's public remarks in Saudi Arabia, he sought to emphasize French support for "behavior change" vice "regime change" in Syria, in an attempt to assuage Saudi public sensitivities.

FEAR OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND APPEAL IN MUSLIM WORLD

¶7. (C) Boche described the Saudi monarch as worried about the Iranian nuclear threat as well as Iran's popular appeal in the Muslim world, where public opinion saw a "double standard" between treatment of Iran's nuclear program and those of Israel, Pakistan and India. Boche added that the Saudi government continued to fear a so-called "Shia arc" from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to Lebanon. He assessed that the Saudi view overlooked the internal differences between all four countries, with Syria not having any Shi'a community to speak of, and Shi'a communities in Lebanon and Iraq very distinct from Iranian counterparts. That said, Boche assessed that the "Shi'a arc" perception in Saudi Arabia continued to impel the Saudi government towards seeking to "detach" Syria from Iran, a strategy which ignored the long-standing strategic relations between the Iranian and Syrian regimes which began under the late Hafiz al-Asad. Boche concluded that the Saudi government wanted the West to keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, without confrontation or destabilizing the region.

PESSIMISM ON IRAQ, FEAR OF JIHADIST SPILLOVER

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¶8. (C) Although Iraq was not a major topic of discussion, Boche described the Saudi King as viewing the current situation there as "catastrophic." He assessed that the King's foremost worry, beyond fearing the breakup of the country and rising Iranian influence, was the security of the Saudi-Iraqi border, and the potential for Saudi jihadists in Iraq to return home to wreak havoc.

RESPONDING TO A HAMAS-LED PA

¶9. (C) Boche noted that, like Iraq, the Israel-Palestinian situation was not a major focus of the Chirac-Abdullah discussions. On the French position, Boche downplayed Chirac's public statements in Riyadh expressing opposition to sanctions on a Hamas-led PA, emphasizing that Chirac's remarks were in response to a question on sanctions, which, at any rate, were not under consideration. As for the Saudi position, Boche assessed that King Abdullah remained mistrustful of Hamas and its links to the Muslim Brotherhood, but at the same time feared a destabilization of the situation in the Palestinian territories and growing Iranian

influence with Hamas. Boche concluded that Saudi Arabia would give funding to a Hamas-led government, in order to diminish potential Iranian influence, though he stressed that King Abdullah did not say this during his discussion with Chirac.

ENCOURAGING REFORMS, BUT QUESTIONING KING'S ISOLATION

¶10. (C) Another recurring theme of Chirac's visit, according to Boche, was encouragement of reforms introduced by King Abdullah, particularly on economic openness, privatization, and political participation. This was why Chirac had sought to address the consultative council, which, though unelected, resembled a genuine assembly in many ways, with open discourse and exchange of ideas. Offering personal observations, Boche noted that a small minority of council members stayed in their seats and did not applaud Chirac's remarks, an indication, in his view, of the depth of fundamentalism and hostility towards the West among some majlis members.

¶11. (C) Commenting further on the atmospherics of the Chirac-Abdullah discussions, Boche (strictly protect) noted that the Saudi King "spoke in aphorisms," with it sometimes being difficult to understand what he meant. Boche added that upon entering the King's expansive palace, with attending staffs and trappings of modernity, he was left wondering what the King understood of the outside world, how he received his information, and who filtered it. Boche concluded that the Saudi leadership is "very far from us," and remains "oceans apart" from the West. Asked to explain his view, given King Abdullah's modernizing reputation, Boche cited the King's advanced age and the fact that Abdullah had grown up during a period when there was no educational opportunity in Saudi Arabia. Boche added, pessimistically, that with the vast majority of the Saudi population under the age of 25, and education still primarily focused on religious instruction with little practical application, Saudi efforts at "Saudization" and sweeping reforms had little hope for success.

SAUD AL-FAISAL-DOUSTE BLAZY: IRAN, SYRIA/LEBANON

¶12. (C) In a separate discussion, MFA DAS-equivalent for Iraq/Iran/Arabian Gulf Affairs Antoine Sivan described Iran as the main topic of a meeting between FM's Douste-Blazy and Saud al-Faisal on the margins of the Chirac visit. Sivan described both sides as agreeing that the international community should keep an "outstretched hand" to Iran while remaining firm on conditions. FM Saud, for his part, cautioned against pursuing policies of confrontation or sanctions on Iran, and affirmed his desire for Saudi Arabia to develop a long-term regional partnership with Iran. What worried Saudi Arabia, according to FM Saud, were the fluctuations in Iranian policy due to its internal situation, and the shifting bases of power within the Iranian regime. Saud also stressed to Douste-Blazy that Saudi Arabia had maintained a clear and frank dialogue with Tehran, and that the Saudi government had a positive capacity to influence Iran and would encourage the Iranians to assuage suspicions on their nuclear program. Saud also emphasized support for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East and concluded that it was difficult to respond to Iranian arguments without drawing parallels with Israel. Saud asserted that the international community's acceptance of Israel's nuclear program had dealt a "fatal blow" to global non-proliferation efforts, as the majority of Muslims worldwide believed that Muslim nations

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should be allowed to develop nuclear energy.

¶13. (C) On Lebanon, FM Saud expressed worry about the situation on the ground and concluded that confessionalism remained the essential problem. The Saudi FM also expressed

concern over the "alliance" between Michel Aoun and Hizballah, which he cited as proof that ending Syrian influence in Lebanon would not mean the end of Lebanon's problems. Like King Abdullah, Saud expressed bitterness over rejection of the Saudi initiative, which he blamed on certain unnamed Lebanese leaders who saw their interests threatened. Saudi Arabia continued to encourage Syria to take steps in favor of Lebanese independence, but FM Saud stressed the need to give Syria time to react and remained hopeful that Syria would change its Lebanon policies, in the end. Douste-Blazy, for his part, stressed the GoF's support for Lebanon's full independence and sovereignty, and insistence that the Hariri investigation proceed unimpeded, with perpetrators held accountable. At the same time, the French FM emphasized that the GoF was not pursuing "regime change" in Syria. Saud al-Faisal expressed support for the French position, especially on the Hariri investigation, and agreed with Douste-Blazy on the need to replace President Lahoud. On possible candidates, Sivan reported that Saud described Michel Aoun an unacceptable option; on a more positive note, Saud commended Nassib Lahoud for his honesty and integrity, but assessed that he may lack the charisma and influence for the presidency. Sivan concluded that, as in the case of Iran, Saud al-Faisal exhibited "a certain reserve" on the Lahoud issue, suggesting a preference for not moving too fast.

COMMENT: COMMERCIAL DISAPPOINTMENT?

14. (C) French press coverage of the Chirac visit focused on the French president's personal rapport with King Abdullah and the lack of commercial contracts concluded, with many media outlets concluding that Chirac's visit had minimal results, despite the two countries' converging views on regional issues. One leftist daily quipped that the Saudis viewed Chirac "like some old family friend that you always like to have to dinner but whose advice and requests are not heeded very closely." Despite Elysee public insistence in advance that no deals would be concluded during the visit, French media had previewed the trip as a last chance for the GoF to conclude long-stalled security and defense contracts, including a sale of some 48 Rafale planes dating back to the 1980's, and the 7 billion euro "Miksa" border surveillance project, long sought by Thales. Our Elysee and MFA contacts downplayed commercial aspects of Chirac's visit, with Boche noting that concluding contracts was never the objective of the visit and that the presence of so many French CEO's in the delegation was a valuable "marketing exercise" for French companies. Boche added that French companies had concluded some 3.5 billion euros in contracts in Saudi Arabia in 2005, making it France's second largest export market in the region after Turkey. Sivan, in a less convincing rebuttal, commented that regional issues remained at the forefront of Chirac's agenda, and that contract discussions were not appropriate for a state visit. Chirac, for his part, declared in March 6 press remarks in Riyadh that the Saudi government was reviewing French security and defense contract proposals in detail, and that everything was occurring in "an excellent climate," though no contracts had been concluded. The conclusion one might draw from Chirac's visit is that his tradition of cultivating highly personalized ties with Arab leaders still has the potential to forge political cooperation on regional issues of mutual concern, but is no longer a magic key for French companies in a competitive global marketplace. Some local Arab political observers, though, speculate that some sales were likely agreed to during the visit, but the Saudi government, averse to the appearance of mixing business and politics, will let announcements of new French contracts dribble out over time. End comment.

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